

GOLDEN AGE OF INDIAN CINEMA

Hello this is Suman Bajaj Kalra, a media professional working in the field of television and films for the past 30 years. Today we are going to learn about the glorious golden age of Indian Cinema from the 1940's to the late 1960's. In this period, Indian cinema refined its cinematic language in all aspects – direction, music, story, acting, characterization and cinematography. Some of the most outstanding film directors and films were produced which are considered classics by film scholars. Some of these directors are - Satyajit Ray, Mehboob Khan, B.R. Chopra, V. Shantaram, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Ritwick Ghatak and Raj Kapoor.

Today, we are going to discuss about:

- 1.The emergence of regional cinema.
- 2.The role of government in promoting film culture in the country.
- 3.The regulatory authority that certifies the films and ensures that our films do not cross the limits of decency or hurt any section of society.
- 4.The volume of business the film industry does.
- 5.The problems faced by the Indian film industry and various issues of concern.

By the mid-forties, Cinema in India had developed its own language and idiom. It was a long journey. It moved from an experimental stage to its role in the freedom struggle of the country. It moved from a silent era to talkies. It moved from borrowed creative expression to evolving its own language of cinema. Finally, from a male-dominated entertainment medium to the one which allowed females to play their role in films as well as allow women to come to the theatres as spectators.

Some of these changes were brought about consciously, while the others were a product of socio-political circumstances. It may not be wrong to say that by now Indian cinema was quite weary of carrying the burden of preserving Indian culture and morals. After the Second World War, it was not really required to play only that role even though India had yet to get independence. Thanks to the division of hugely talented Bengal, lot of talent was now available to come up with stories and soul stirring music. The focus shifted from the nation to the common man who was facing issues of joblessness, poverty, class divide between castes, rich and poor and “English speaking” Indians and a very earthy population. The much ridiculed “kin-lost-in-Kumbh-mela-and-found-well-into-manhood” syndrome apparently was stuck in Indian psyche due to the Indian partition and dislocation and the big and tormenting Bengal divide.

The suffering of the common man came to the fore as significant theme along with a critical look at Indian social stigmas. These themes required very powerful and creative rendering to wrench the hearts of the viewers because, in those days, if the film did not make you shed tears, it was not good enough. Pathos was the only reality of life.

In the Golden Age films were rich in songs as music played a very important role in the popularity of films. Equally important was the setting of the story, acting and direction. The lilting tunes of that era still haunt the music lovers of today. The black and white photography reached its zenith during this period. In short, cinema had matured to an art form in India with strong Indian ethos. It had truly left the foreign influence behind.

This period could also be called the 'coming out age' of the Indian cinema. Indian films began to make a mark at international film festivals. Chetan Anand's "Neecha Nagar" (1946) won Grand Prix in the 1st Cannes Film Festival. Satyajit Ray's "Aparajito" won Golden Lion at Venice Film Festival. Films like "Mother India" by Mehboob Khan, "Naya Daur" by B.R. Chopra, "Bandini" by Bimal Roy also won praise at the international film festivals.

This period also saw the birth of neo-realistic cinema or New Wave Cinema influenced by Italy and France. It was art cinema supported by the government funding through Film Finance Corporation. Some of the eminent films makers of this genre were Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mani Kaul, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Kumar Shahani, Basu Bhattacharya, Mrinal Sen and Basu Chatterji. Sadly, the movement did not last very long due to lack of financial support and low audience turnout. The government was also reluctant to spend lavishly on these films. Often these films were treated as launch pads for the FTII graduates who were otherwise not in demand due to their contempt for the commercial song and dance films.

FILM MAKERS OF THE GOLDEN AGE

V. Shantaram

V. Shantaram was arguably the most innovative and ambitious film maker of this era. His distinct style and social concern were evident from his first talkie "Ayodhya ka Raja" in 1932 to "Admi" in 1939. He dealt with issues like the caste system, religious bigotry and women's rights. Even when Shantaram took up stories from the past, he used these as parables to highlight contemporary issues. While the film, "Amrit Manthan" in 1934 opposed the senseless violence of Hindu rituals, "Dharmatama" in 1935 dealt with Brahmanical orthodoxy and the caste system. "Amarjyoti" in 1936 was an allegory on the oppression of women in which the protagonist seeks revenge. It could perhaps be called the first women's lib film in India.

"Duniya Na Mane" in 1937 was about a young woman's courageous resistance to a much older husband whom she had been tricked into marrying. He also emerged as a reformist through his films like "Do Anken Barah Haath" on the plight of prisoners and jail reforms and "Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani" about the travails of Dr. Kotnis in the Chinese war camps.

Bimal Roy

Bimal Roy entered the field of cinema as a camera assistant. His directorial debut was with "Udayer Pathay" in 1944. He introduced a new era of post World War romantic-realist melodramas that was an integration of the Bengal School style with that of De Sica.

“Do Bigha Zamin” (1953) and ‘Sujata’ were two of the most notable films of Bimal Roy, who basically was a reformist and a liberal humanist. “Do Bigha Zamin” was one of the first Indian films to show the mass migration of rural people to cities and their degradation in urban slums. Roy sought to relieve the starkness of the story by brave and hopeful songs and dances. “Sujata” dealt with the issue of the untouchable who accidentally enters the world of the urban middle class. The anguish of the rural people was the theme of his superbly artistic film “Parakh”.

Mehboob Khan

Mehboob Khan’s subjects were down to earth, dramatic, even melodramatic. He made “Roti” in the early 1940s. It was inspired by the German Expressionism, and is seen as a critique of Indian society. It dealt with two models – a powerful millionaire in an industrial civilization and a tribal couple still living a primitive existence.

Mehboob remade his 1940’s film “Aurat” as “Mother India” in colour in 1957. It was a path breaking film which later acquired an epic status. The story revolves around Radha, played by Nargis, one of the strongest woman characters of Indian cinema. With courage she fights off the sexual advances, abandonment of her husband and an errant son who she kills at the end. Mehboob’s successful and critically acclaimed films often featured clashes between the rural poor and rich urban classes.

B.R. Chopra

Writer, director and producer of eminence, Baldev Raj Chopra was a towering figure of the golden era of the Hindi film industry. His films “Naya Daur’ on the problems of labour class, “Dhool Ka Phool” on the theme of social stigma faced by unwed mother and “Kanoon” on the flaws in legal system were some of the path breaking films of that time. He is credited with 25 films as producer, director and story writer.

Satyajit Ray

A writer, director, painter and scholar, Satyajit Ray is considered one of the best film makers of the world. He won a “Lifetime Achievement” Oscar award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts. His films are both cinematic and literary at the same time. He used simple narrative style with an eye for the minutest detail. His films operated at many levels of interpretation. He brought neo-realism to Indian cinema with his very first film “Pather Panchali”. This film established his reputation as a major film director, winning numerous awards including Best Human Document, at Cannes, 1956 and Best Film, at Vancouver, 1958. It is the first film of a trilogy - The Apu Trilogy - a three-part tale of a boy’s life from birth through manhood. The other two films of this trilogy are “Aparajito” (The Unvanquished, 1956) and “Apur Sansar” (The World of Apu, 1959). This trilogy remains his most critically and internationally acclaimed work though he made 10 more films. The most significant among them were “Jalsaghar”, “Nayak”, “Devi” and “Mahanagar”. He also made one Hindi film, “Shatranj Ke Khiladi”.

Raj Kapoor

Raj Kapoor became one of the most successful directors of his times. He set up the R. K. Films in 1948 with his first directorial venture "Aag". His other films "Awara" in 1951 and "Shri 420" in 1955 took a sentimental approach to social reforms, presenting political independence as a loss of innocence in exchange of stability. He is credited with projecting the dilemma of a commoner lost in the glitz and glamour of the speedily modernizing society. He was greatly influenced by Charlie Chaplin which showed in the themes, narrative style and imagery in his films. His popularity spread across continents, particularly in Russia and China. His significant films are "Mera Naam Joker", "Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai" and "Prem Rog".

Guru Dutt

Guru Dutt entered the Hindi film industry as a choreographer turned assistant director. His first directorial venture was "Baazi". His earlier films were entertainers like "Aar Paar" in 1954, "Mr. and Mrs. 55" in 1955 and "CID" in 1956. With the darkly romantic "Pyaasa" in 1957 Guru Dutt embarked on a new journey which included "Kaagaz Ke Phool" in 1959. It was the first Indian film made in Cinemascope. It was said to be autobiographical in nature since it featured the story of a famous film director, his disastrous marriage and relationship with an actress leading to his failure as a director and his death. His work was intense and of high artistic standard. He features in the global list of great film makers of all times.

CINEMA OF 70's ONWARDS

The Golden Age of Indian cinema began to fade by the late sixties. Audiences, bored with pathetic themes began to demand pure escapist entertainment. Cinema began to drift away from the roots of Indian culture. It was no longer interested in holding a mirror to society. Suddenly the film makers became rudderless. They were lost for themes. The public wanted to move on to cinema of fun, romance, frolic and escapism with pretty pictures. Costumes, pretty heroines, song and dance came in as a result.

Television had begun to erode the space so far occupied by films exclusively. Colour in films had begun to pose many challenges to the directors who felt the compulsion to exploit it to the fullest. It was boring and incongruent to present sob stories in blazing colours.

A formula evolved to serve up an exciting fare for the senses. In measure there was romance, fashion, lilting music, background of snow-clad scenic beauty, a comedian shadowing the romantic hero, and, finally, a brute rape by a villain to attack dainty, pure and vulnerable heroines. Heroes displayed bravado and rescued the damsels in distress. It all came to a happy ending in the last scenes to the tunes of shehnais. It was just the right mix for the senses – all nine rasas or emotions played out dramatically.

Film makers played with different genres. This phase belonged to the superheroes in valour as in love – Amitabh Bachhan, Rajesh Khanna, Dharmendra, Vinod Khanna, Shatrughan Sinha, Sanjeev Kumar, Pran, Premnath, Rajendra Kumar, Johnny Walker, Mehmood and Rajkumar. All of them served the formula that was the reigning king.

Many of the film scholars consider it the downward phase of Indian cinema whereas others find the experimentation and novelty of the themes a healthy sign.

However, there is redemption in the fact that the contemporary Indian films are exploring new themes with boldness. In terms of technology they are scaling new heights and are comparable with the most advanced cinema of the world. The film makers no longer shy away from hitherto untouched and unmentionable subjects like homosexuality, terrorism, police and crime nexus, feminine sexuality, corruption, religious prejudices, flawed education system, politician – business nexus, rot in politics, underworld politics and the parallel economy. It is sending out warning signals of the volatility of the situation today.

Contemporary Indian cinema is global in its mindset, marketing and distribution network. The films are distributed across the globe. Leading studios like Twentieth Century Fox, Universal Studios, Disney, Miramax and Fox Entertainment are taking a keen interest in producing and marketing Indian films globally.

There is a huge interest in the Bollywood style of film making, Indian stories and locales. The following figures corroborate this:

- Indian cinema contributes more than 70% to the Asia Pacific film market with a total share of US\$11 billion every year.
- Box Office collections are poised to touch Rs. 13,000 crores by 2013.
- Indian population is 15% of the world population, making it the biggest film industry of the world.
- In 2009, as many as 1290 films in 24 languages were given a censor certificate, most of them in Hindi.
- Almost all the Hindi films and a majority of south Indian films are distributed overseas and earn foreign exchange. For example, a recent film, “Dum Maro Dum”, earned Rs. 29.75 crore in India; 2,08,000 pounds in the United Kingdom and 5,35,000 US dollars elsewhere. This includes multiple sales of video, music and theatrical release and television rights.

PROBLEMS FACED BY THE FILM INDUSTRY

- There is no Central Regulatory authority to bring about an all-round order and system. The Film Federation of India is a self-regulatory body but lacks teeth.
- Shortage of funds. Films are a very expensive proposition and risky investment, as hardly 10% succeed. Only about 60% of completed films manage to get a theatrical release. A large number of films lie unfinished in the cans due to shortage of funds.
- Prior to 2001, banks were reluctant to lend money to film industry as it was an unorganized sector with huge risk involved in investment. After getting industry status, some sort of corporatisation and regulation has taken place, but not totally.

- The film industry loses a substantial amount of its revenue to piracy which is rampant not only in India, but also overseas. Often pirated copies of the film flood the market at cheaper rates even before the film is released.
- Implementation of Copyright Act is lax. In fact, education about the copyright is lacking even amongst the educated class and film industry personnel. Plagiarism is rampant.
- The entertainment tax rate is very high breaking the back of an average producer.
- Black money still operates in the film industry.
- The infrastructure for film production is insufficient and expensive.

THE OFFICIAL WATCHDOG– CENSORSHIP

The role of censorship is not merely to control and limit the freedom of a film or films but also to safeguard the rights and dignity of people, specifically women and weaker sections. It is supposed to control elements that can disrupt the peace of the country or denigrate a section of the society. It is supposed to ensure that the films do not encroach upon the freedom of the minority religions.

The objectives of film certification are to ensure that:

- No exploitation takes place through films.
- It aims to create an atmosphere of freedom to carry out the creative activity in a manner that is responsible and sensitive to the values and standards of society.
- The medium of films must provide healthy and clean entertainment.
- It must not ridicule any religions, minorities, physical or mental disability.
- It must not show children indulging in crime and drugs. It must not glorify crime. Human sensibilities are not offended by vulgarity, obscenity or depravity.
- National symbols and emblems are not shown except in accordance with the provisions of the Emblems and Names (Prevention of Improper Use) Act, 1950 (12 of 1950).
- Peace and sovereignty of the country must not be jeopardized.

In order to ensure all these are carried out, it has been mandatory to obtain a censorship certificate without which a film can not be publicly shown. The Censor Board of Film Certification has its headquarters at Mumbai with regional offices in all the film producing states.

The Censor Board consists of : –

- 1.An Advisory Panel,
- 2.Assistant Regional Officer

3.Board and its members

4.Chairperson

5.Chief Executive Officer

6. Examining Officer.

The films are give four kinds of certificates:

1.“U” – for universal viewing

2.“A” - when a film is only restricted for adult viewership.

3.“UA” – unrestricted viewership but with a word of caution for parental discretion.

4.“S”- viewership restricted to a special class of people.

The applicant has a right to appeal if not satisfied with the verdict of the Central Board of Film Certification.

FILM POLICY

The Government of India has formulated a film policy to support and promote film culture in the country. Various organizations have been set up to fulfill this objective. Some of the important organizations working in this area are:-

1.Film and Television Institute of India (FTII)

It was set up in 1960 to impart quality training in all the creative and technical areas of film production. This was a major step in the promotion of cinema in the country. Most of the directors of New Wave cinema were products of FTII, one of the best known film institutes of the world.

2.Films Division (FD)

It was set up in 1948 and can boast of the largest film archive of Indian history, politics, heritage and the most defining moments of India. It encourages and promotes production of informative and critical documentary films that play an important role in society.

3.National Film Development Corporation (NFDC)

It was set up in 1975 to plan, promote and organize an integrated and efficient development of Indian film industry and foster excellence in cinema. It has so far funded over 300 films. NFDC has not been successful in producing commercially successful films; nor has it been able to effectively boost the image of the Indian films abroad.

4.Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF)

It was set up in 1973 with the objective of promoting cinema through international film festivals in India where best of international cinema shared the screen space with Indian films. It also sends out the best pick of Indian cinema to foreign festivals.

Recap

We tried to understand how Indian cinema evolved, and its journey from golden age and the emergence and flowering of regional cinema. We focused on some of the stalwarts of the Indian cinema and got to know about the films they made. We also learnt about the themes that were prevalent at that time.

We had a closer look at the work of greats like Satyajit Ray, Mehboob Khan, B.R. Chopra, V. Shantaram, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Ritwick Ghatak and Raj Kapoor, to name a few.

We learnt about the need for the government to play a role of the promoter of cinema to give it the necessary boost. We learnt about the need for a regulatory authority to keep an eye on the kind of films being made, the role, purpose and formation of the Censor Board.

We also looked at the problem of the Indian film industry, the Film Policy of the government and its role in regulating and promoting cinema through various bodies like FTII, NFDC, Directorate of Film Festivals, Censor Board of Film Certification and Films Division.

Some of the perennial problems of the Indian film industry have been solved to a limited extent through this film policy. But a lot still remains to be done, particularly in the area of piracy and supporting a small film maker with funds and exhibition facility.

That is all we have today. Thank you and take care.